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ABSTRACT

This paper examines children's preferences and understanding of stories and story elements by analyzing an extensive collection of art, writing, and teacher observations of one child, Virginia. The paper traces the progession of Virginia's understanding of character, setting, action/plot, and preference for fairy tale structures as evidenced in both her drawings and written work, which span the ages 4 years and 6 months to 13 years and 3 months. The paper also suggests ways in which teachers, parents, and other educators can foster children's understanding of the elements of a story. (Six figures of Virginia's drawings and writing samples are included.) (KEH)

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Yes, (Virginia), We Can See Your Story: Examining Story Elements in the Drawing and Writing of Children

by

Janice Sherman

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INSIGHTS into open education

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YES, (VIRGINIA), WE CAN SEE YOUR STORY: EXAMINING STORY ELEMENTS IN THE DRAWING AND WRITING OF CHILDREN

by

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Who in the world is (Virginia)?

Children who have books read to them develop a sense of the conventions of stories including formal beginnings and endings, central characters, plot and climax, and structures for particular types of stories such as fairy tales and folk tales (Clay, 1982; Ferreiro & Teverosky, 1982). Research has substantiated that children as young as two years of age have begun to distinguish stories by the formal opening and closing phrases as well as by the consistent use of past tense (Applebee, 1978). Much of the research regarding children's knowledge of stories and the personal meanings that stories hold for them has been based on the response of individual children to literature in their language and play (White, 1954; Crago & Crago, 1983) or through observations of children in classroom settings (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Bussis et al., 1985).

The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives, housed in the Special Collections Section of Chester Fritz Library at the University of North Dakota, provides yet another way to examine children's understanding of stories and story elements. By examining the extensive collection of art, writing, and teacher observations of individual children, preserved primarily on slides and microfiche, it is possible to learn much about a child's preferences and understanding of story elements.

The collected drawings, writings and observations of (Virginia)[1] span the ages 4 years, 6 months to 13 years, 3 months when she was a student at the Prospect School in Bennington, Vermont. The progression of (Virginia)'s understanding of character, setting, action/plot, and preference for fairy tale structures is very visible in both her drawings and written work.

The influence of literature on the story elements and sense of story that exist in (Virginia)'s drawings was noted in the teacher observations during her early experience at Prospect School. When she was age five, her teacher (K.A.) wrote:

> *(Virginia) has continued to do all the other things that she began in the fall—especially drawing and looking through books. (Virginia)'s pictures are very funny and lively and she gives them nice little touches—particular attention to a hat, or a cane, or a piece of fruit. She sometimes asks me to write things down on her pictures. She really likes story times, and has a good memory for stories she has heard before. (Prospect Archives, p. 5)*

(Y.B.), her teacher when she was seven years old, also commented on this phenomenon:

> *(Virgina) also likes books and stories a lot for all the solemnity that surrounds her own efforts to*

[1](Virginia) is a pseudonym given to protect the identity of this child whose file is a part of the Reference Edition of the Prospect Archive. The drawings, writings, and observations of (Virginia) utilized in this paper are all taken from the Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives, North Bennington, VT.

read. She is particularly drawn to large scale picture books. These obviously appeal to her visual interest, but I think she may also tell stories to pictures. Many of her own drawings seem to "hold" a moment within a story in her heart. (Prospect Archives, p. 38).

The teacher observations also indicate that the preferred medium of expression for (Virginia) was drawing. During the year that (Virginia) was seven years old, (Y.B.) wrote:

(Virginia)'s drawing deserves some special attention. Her work is complex, making one cohesive statement while including many details and story elements. She uses color freely. She likes to draw people and animals in action and also draws large faces. (Prospect Archives, p. 29)

The Element of Character

For most children, the favorite subject for early drawings is the human body. This is also typical of (Virginia)'s early drawings including the earliest in her file which was completed at age three, prior to her enrollment at the Prospect School (see Figure 1). This drawing,consisting of six figures, includes details such as arms, legs, feet, facial features, and something worn on the heads of most of the figures. This interest in head gear extends throughout (Virginia)'s drawings and expands to include crowns on the heads of royalty, feathered hats, berets, umbrellas, and even rollers in the hair. Careful examiniation of Figures 2 through 6 will all reveal some attention to the head covering of the central characters.

Favorite types of characters for (Virginia)'s drawing and writing include royalty, witches, wizards, mermaids, and families. In regard to the presence of characters in her drawings, (Virginia)'s teacher, (Y.B.), wrote in the fall of the school year when she was seven:

There is an abundance of fantasy in which I think she is the central figure—so it would seem from her drawings. In the drawings she often gives the central figure her own name and the drawings themselves often imply wondrous events. (Prospect Archives, p. 38)

Later during the same school year, (Y.B.) noted:

She has a fondness for representing kings and queens and clowns. Sometimes the king is also a clown, she continues to invest each drawing with something special—a hat, fancy chair, a "drink machine." (Prospect Archives, p. 40)

(Virginia) remained in (Y.B.)'s classroom during the school year when she was eight and had the following entry written in her records:

Equally her drawing has been continuous and prolific. She draws many subjects—lately she has been enjoying fancy ladies, queens, princes, clowns, houses with fancy doors. These are all familiar themes in (Virginia)'s work, richly embellished. (Prospect Archives, p. 50)

The dictated and written stories of (Virginia) progress from simple identification of a central character in early stories to detailed descriptions in later stories. The following examples from her selected writings illustrate this progression:

There was a girl fishing and the food of the fishie dropped down and the whale had a umbrella and the piece of a umbrella fell into the mermaid's mouth. And the girl that is fishing only got one fish and she got some presents and threw them down into the pond. And he never knew what was happening in the water. The end. (Age 4)

One day a man was fishing and a 'sterious thing happened in the water. The worm bited the fish's mouth and he throwed up all his food and a big shark came long and the umbrella didn't keep him warm at all. And the

umbrella piece fell off the umbrella. (Age 5)

In these stories, which were presumably dictated and recorded verbatim, the central character is identified (a man, a girl) but not named or described. The reader has no way of knowing if it was an old man or a little girl that (Virginia) was referring to, for example. It is also interesting to note the lack of clarity in the use of pronouns. Who is the him that the umbrella didn't keep warm?

By the time she is seven (Virginia) has begun to name the central character as well as to have eliminated much of the confusion surrounding the use of pronouns as can be seen in the following writing samples:

The house is a log cabin. A girl lives in the log cabin. Her name was Ruth. She lives with her mommy. The chimney was made out of rocks. The Mommy's name is Ruth too. The rope is made out of bark. The log is square. (Age 7)

Once there was a wizard. His name was Allquoneya. He lived in an underground cave. The room looked like this: a big cauldron on the fire always cooking, a shelf filled with jars of cut up frogs and books, a bed and wardrobe, and light, plus a jar of water. He had a brown cat with a bone collar. The wizard had a beard and big hat with stars and moons on it and a robe with stars and moons too. He had some gold buttons and silver curved shoes. . . (Age 7)

This last writing sample, completed during the school year when she was seven, is rich with descriptive details about the central character whom she has imaginatively named Allquoneya. It is possible to picture this wizard in his pointed hat and long robe bent over his cauldron to stir the magic potion.

An increase and persistence for rich descriptions of her central character is evident in the writing sample that (Virginia) completed when she was nine.

Ma was not a kind woman but she was pretty. She had a sweet voice. She had long red hair that was always tied up in braids. Blue eyes and pink cheeks. She always had a butterfly dress on and black sandals. Pa was nicest, but no one knew where he was. Ma said, "It doesn't matter."

I was the oldest in the family (except for ma). My name is Mary and I am 14 years old. My brother is 4 years old and his name is Jacob. I have a little sister she is 9 years old and her name is Millie. Ma's name is Anna and she is 35 years old.

We lived in a house next to a house that everbody said was haunted. I believed it so didn't everybody else. I thought that Pa was captured in the house next door. One day I said to Jacob and Millie "Let's go to the haunted house."

"But isn't there skeletons, goblins, ghosts and witches," asked my little sister Millie and my little brother Jacob . . . (Age 9)

An increasing amount of details for central and subsidiary characters is easily traced through the above examples of (Virginia)'s writing and drawing. This shows a growing awareness of the importance of character as an element of a story.

The Element of Setting

The child's awareness of home as a place or setting is often visible in his/her drawings of houses at an early age. These usually are quite stereotyped with the typical drawing including the exterior of a two-story house with windows, door, peaked roof, chimney with smoke. Landscape details often include grass, sun, and tree(s). The cover drawing and writing completed by (Virginia) when she was five years old fits this typical pattern.

As (Virginia)'s concept of place or setting broadens, it is reflected in both her drawing and writing. Figure 2 and the accompanying story, also completed by (Virginia) when she was five, serve as an example of the importance of school as a

setting for children of this age. It is the first extensive experience with a setting other than their home for many children.

By the time she was seven, (Virginia)'s drawings depicted her understanding of the interior and exterior of buildings, outdoor settings with above and below the ground details (Figure 4), and an awareness of architecture in different lands (Figure 3).

The selected samples of her writing previously discussed also indicate an expanding concept of the awareness and importance of setting. In the writing dictated when she was age 4, the reader has almost finished the passage before discovering that the girl was fishing in a pond rather than the ocean, a stream, or river. The first writing sample for age seven (The house is a log cabin . . .), shows that by this time the importance of setting being introduced early in the story has been recognized. This is also apparent in the following writing completed at age six.

This is a tree house. And a witch lives in the tree house and there was people that went in. And when they went in they didn't come out alive and the owl in his hole in the tree was very mad . . . (Age 6)

The use of setting to create a mood for the story is very evident in the writings of (Virginia) by age seven when she wrote the story about Allquoneya, the wizard. The reader is given details of where the cave was and what it contained. These descriptive details of setting to provide a flavor or mood for the story become more evident when she began to write chapter stories such as this one completed at age ten.

The Planet

Chapter 1

Oliver sat on the front porch cross legged, looking out on the early morning misty moors of England . . .

Chapter 2

Oliver and his family were on a vacation in Spain. It was hot and the shriveled plants that grow there was a very dismal to look at (sic) . . .

The ability to change setting within the same story has now been recognized by (Virginia) and effectively accomplished in her writing. By age 13, the written and pictorial expression of setting has been eloquently mastered by (Virginia) (Figure 6).

The Element of Action/Plot

Cognitive psychologists and others would agree that experience with motion and movement for the child begins during infancy. Moving objects catch the attention of the infant and the toddler is liberated by the ability to walk. The repeated drawings of human figures which young children so commonly practice may appear to be "still-lifes" or inanimate portraits at first glance. The curved lines of feet or arms, however, may be the young child's attempt to represent motion in the form of walking feet or waving arms. Figure 2, completed when (Virginia) was three, shows such a possibility. The cover drawing includes action in the form of a child swinging in the tree. By age five, (Virginia) is using sequential pictures to show action as indicated by the drawing and accompanying text in Figure 3. Action in the form of speech is appearing in (Virginia)'s drawings by age seven (see Figure 4). This particular drawing illustrates a great deal of action both above and below ground. The birds in the sky, the building of a sand castle, the tending of a garden, and the activity or inactivity of the moles in their tunnels all seem to be woven together to provide a multiple story and plot. Figure 5, completed at age nine, seeks to convey a simple, yet familiar plot. It would seem that a vendor is selling ice cream and popsicles in the park. A young girl comes to make a purchase and both characters in the "picture story" are pleased by the action. End of story.

During (Virginia)'s first year at the Prospect School, her teacher (K.A.) wrote of the role of action for this child within the classroom setting as well as her drawings:

> *(Virginia) has played in block blocks, building houses and hiding under large pieces of cloth. She likes to dress up and play house; she has done painting and drawing and her pictures are detailed and lively—girls, houses, people doing things. She was able to make a fairly complicated window picture—where you open a flap and see what is underneath. (Virginia) has played in the sand, mixing imaginary desserts, and played with water, using funnels and tubes. She has done a lot of gluing and collage and has made several dolls. (Prospect Archives, p. 3)*

This entry attests to the engagement with, awareness of, and representation of action which continues through her early elementary years as indicated by this observation recorded by her teacher (Y.B.) when she was eight.

> *(Virginia) has continued to be active in dramatic play. She was a magic rabbit, a sorceress, the queen in THE TINDER-BOX, Eric the Red's wife, and wicked Queen in Snow White. She continues to develop the expressive power of her voice and also to be able to provide the proper narrative line to keep the action clear and help the audience. Indeed, during the Snow White production, she was, all at once, the Queen, prompter, narrator and director without at all disturbing the flow of the production. (Prospect Archives, p. 50)*

Similarly, (Virginia)'s dictated and written stories are full of action. Examples completed prior to age seven seem to be primarily a series of actions woven together without the conceptualization of a plan or plot (see stories for age five and six). By age seven, however, a plan or plot is evident in most of her writing such as the example:

> *One day a witch was stirring her big black cauldron when a frog jumped in her cave and the frog said "I'm under a spell because the wizard put me under a spell. Can you help me get out of it?" But the witch didn't help him. She put him in the pot and stirrin him up. Then the wizard jumped in a cave and said what did you do with my frog. I put him in my cauldron. What? said the wizard. Get him out or you will be a frog too. But the witch didn't take the frog out. So the wizard turned the witch into a frog to his castle. Ane (sic) he put the frog in a dungeon. The dungeon was filled with spider webs and the frog cried and cried. The wizard was happy all the time. (Prospect Archives) (Age 7)*

The development of multiple plots appears in (Virginia)'s stories written with chapters using central characters placed in different settings and involved in a variety of actions. Recall the previously cited story entitled The Planet. (Virginia) places Oliver, the central character, in a variety of settings and situations which lead him to adventure on a new planet which he has created. The plot and action of each chapter is woven together to create a more complex plot which cements the chapters together as a complete story.

Preference for Fairy Tale Structure

ONCE A PON A TIME THERE WAS A HOUSE AND A LION The END (sic from cover illustration). One day a man was fishing and a 'sterious thing happened (story at age five). A witch, a frog, a cauldron, a castle, and a wizard who was happy all the time (story at age seven). Mythical characters, exotic settings and magical events are common occurrences in the drawing and writing of (Virginia) which have been illustrated here. Space constraints for this publication limit more examples of castles, queens, princes which abound throughout her years at Prospect School. In describing (Virginia)'s observable interests at age eight, (Y.B.) wrote:

> *I guess I've already mentioned most of (Virginia)'s interests: Drawing, writing, dra-*

matics, and handwork. I can add here that in drawing, writing and dramatics, she has a preference for fairy tale and magic motifs. There are also fancy ladies and houses with greatly detailed and elaborated windows and doors. Detail is striking in both drawing and writing. In her writing, she experiments with style—flashbacks, dialague, first person, etc. The dialague is remarkably real . . . (Prospect Archives, p. 56)

Once upon a time there was an enchanting child named (Virginia). She was magically transformed into a lovely young lady. And we hope that she lived happily ever after.

Implications for Educators

Reading, drawing, writing, creative dramatics, calligraphy. Workbooks, worksheets, flashcards, fill-in-the-blank. The methods and the results obtained are in sharp contrast. Is your classroom providing the kinds of opportunities that will allow (Virginia), Bobby, Suzette, Joe, and Maria to acquire the concepts and elements of story and to express them in their preferred medium? If you are, you too can observe character, setting, plot/action, and fairy tale structures in the drawing and writing of your students.

The following suggestions are but a few ways in which teachers, parents, and other educators can foster children's understanding of the elements of a story:

a) When reading pictures books to younger children and story books to older children, direct questions and focus discussion on where the story is taking place, whom the story is about, and the various events that happen in the story. Note unusual features such as differences in architecture, geography, and costumes which indicate settings different from those with which they are familiar. For younger children it is probably advisable to focus on setting or character or action for an extended period in order to develop understanding of each concept. Have children compare the settings, characters, and actions from several books that you have read.

b) Provide children with the opportunities to draw the settings, characters, and actions from the stories that have been read to them or that they have read. Prepare them in advance so that they can be listening to the story from that perspective. For example, "When we finish reading this story, I want you to draw a picture of whom you think the story was about... (or) where you think the story happened...(or) what you think will happen next." For older children, this involves listening carefully to details about the settings, characters, or actions within the stories. Children can also be involved in creating settings or costumes for characters with blocks, clay, pictures cut from magazines, and other materials.

c) Before reading stories to children, have them make predictions about the characters in the story, where it takes place, and what happens based on the illustrations.

Once upon a time, there was a classroom where children were encouraged to read, listen, explore, think, and express themselves. And everyone lived more happily ever after. (Educators, this doesn't have to be a fairy tale).

Figure 1
(Virginia)
3.1
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Figure 2
(Virginia)
5.27.3
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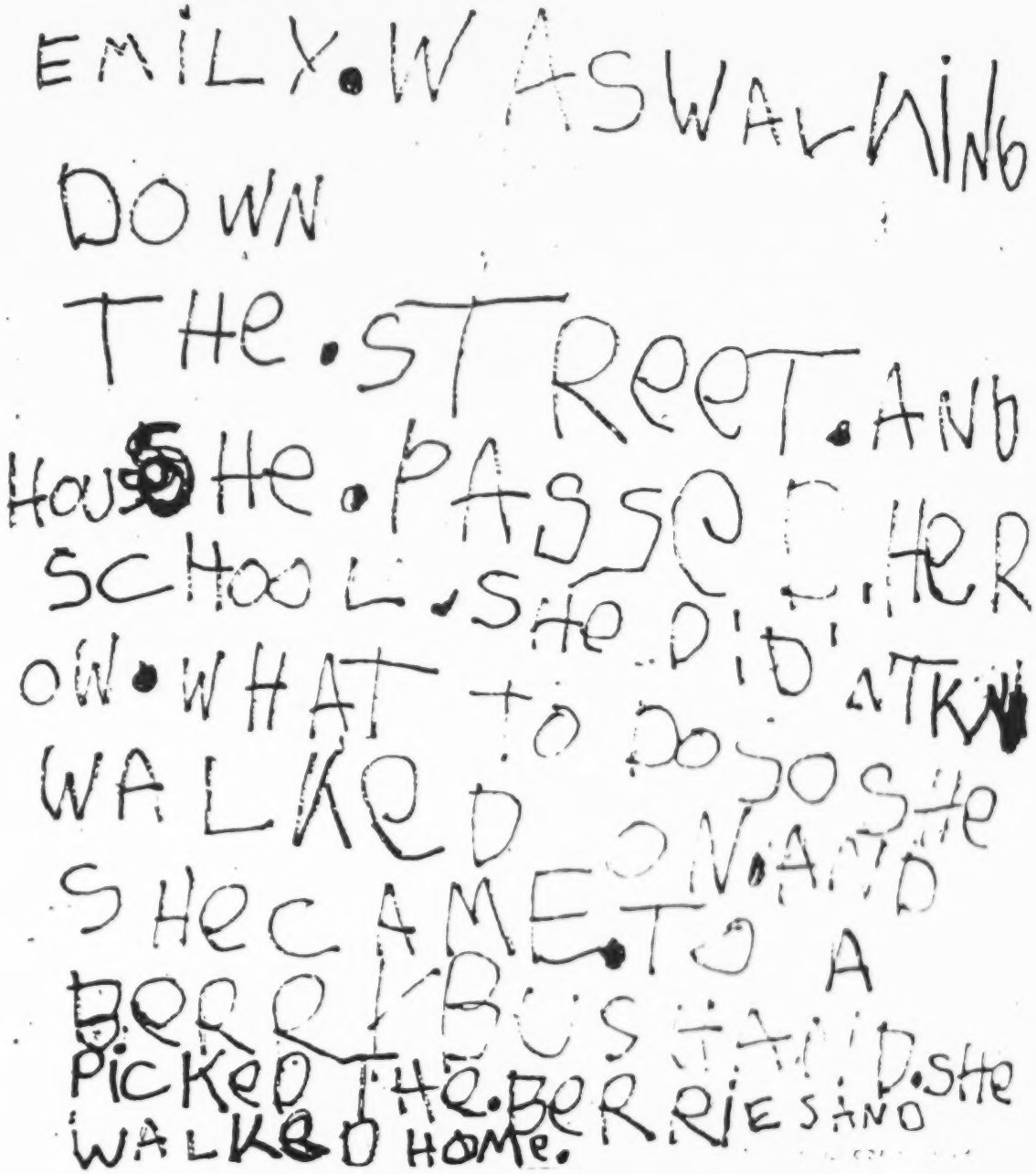

Figure 2
(Virginia)
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Figure 3
(Virginia)
7.7
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Figure 4
(Virginia)
7.49
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Figure 5
(Virginia)
9.101
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The Spring day was pleasantly warm. Ies sat on a hill of dannditions and comtemplated the Sky. It was clear, with-out a cloud. Below her were her Aunt's gardens. They glittered with dew. Ies looked at the gardens and loved them. Fountains spewed coloured water, matching the flowers around it's base. Tall poplar trees framed the garden and gave it a freash look.

Figure 6
(Virginia)
13.2110
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